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"Beowulf, the Icelander. A comparative Study between the Poem and the Nordic Tradition"

Abstract: This article examines the main roots of the epic poem *Beowulf* and suggests the possibility of its belonging more to the Nordic/Germanic tradition rather than any other. As it will be shown, this poem nourishes itself with elements that are extremely similar to those used by Skaldic poets and Old Nordic Storytellers. To make the relation clearer between these two traditions, the article focuses on five different issues: the first one deals with the historical background when *Beowulf* might have been written, roughly the tenth or eleventh century. Then, the essay focuses on a comparison between Old English and Old Nordic poetry in order to see the structural interrelation between them. The following part deals with content, comparing the poem to what is probably the most important Icelandic narrative corpus. By comparing *Beowulf* with Icelandic *sögur*, the paper does not attempt to relate such enormous literary works. The intention is to compare the main issues dealt with in the texts. After analyzing the poem as a whole -structure and content-, the discussion swifts in order to show the cultural issues that are of importance in understanding the correlation between these texts, approaching them in the tradition of Proppian Folk-tale structure, and thus dealing with Indo-European arguments that arguably state the origin of these narratives.

Keywords: Beowulf, Icelandic Sögur, Skaldic Poetry, Nordic Tradition, Folk-tale, Old English Poetry.

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0. Introduction

There is a lot of research done on Beowulf, the most famous, if not the most important poem of all Old English Poetry. However, little has been said concerning the reasons why this poem does not deal with Angles, Normans or even Saxons. It is the story of a Geat, a man from the north, that it has, at no point apparently at least, relation with Old English society. The theories regarding this question have not been really conclusive. They are just presented as theories in which the author, whoever it was, wanted to link Danish and Anglo-Saxon history into one (Hill 46 and Girvan 81). This paper, however, deals more with the fact that this poem belongs to some traditions that would link it to Northern Europe's folklore, whose roots are also intertwined with the Indo-European ones. To do so, I decided to separate this colossal task in seven sections, besides this *zero part*.

The first part deals with historical accounts regarding the time when Beowulf could have been written. It also explores the *sögur* (Old Nordic plural for "Sagas"), a perfect example of how Nordic tales endured the tests of time and lived on to be written in late Medieval times. That is to say, Icelandic *sögur* were written based on stories that were real and that were told orally from generation to generation until they were written and structured in what we know as *sögur*. It is also important to mention them as elements of historical account for links between the Nordic world and the Anglo-Saxon one. For instance, *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar*, written around 1220, tells the story of three generations, starting with Thorolf, going through Skallagrím and after to Egil, of Vikings whom had contact with the Anglo-Saxon country during the tenth century. (*Sagas of the Icelanders* 8-184)

The second and third part deals with how the poetry of these two intertwined worlds works, establishing differences and similarities between them. In the fourth part, I use *The Sagas of the Icelanders* as my main source, a translation and analysis of different Icelandic *sögur*. The intention of this section is not to establish a direct connection between Beowulf and the *sögur*, since that would be impossible, due to the difference of centuries in which both were written, but to analyze Nordic narrative and how those structures *could* be related with Beowulf, at least as narrative devices. Also, there will be an analysis of *Grettir Saga*, as an example of a saga that, at some points has much in common with *Beowulf*.

The fifth part consists of a contrast of both Nordic and Anglo-Saxon world from a cultural perspective. That is, knowing that the Saxons became part of the cultural world of England, what aspects of this culture could be related with the Nordic cultural sphere, such as legislation or economy appearing on the book.

The last section, before my conclusions, focuses on the Indo-European issue, since from what I have discovered, certain aspects of the traditions in which *Beowulf* is based have their roots in the old Indo-European tradition, being thus the Nordic tradition a plausible candidate to be the vehicle of this traditions, such as the Dragon Slayer tradition or the Two-Trolls tradition. Also, there will be an analysis of the theory that states that the roots of the poem could be Celtic, arguing nevertheless for a more probable Nordic origin.

1. Historical Facts

It is considered that Beowulf was "[m]ade around the year 1000, most likely during the reign of King Æthelred the Unready (978-1016). [T]his manuscript committed to parchment a tale that, in some modern scholars' opinions, had been passed down for centuries, between generations of storytellers." (Harrison n/p) If so, that would give the original poem a wide range of centuries to be told for the first time. However, as I will show later, thanks to the work of J. Michael Stitt, since *Beowulf* belongs to one or more Indo-European traditions, and

those traditions have an approximate date of origin, it is plausible to determine a "when" for this work. In this part, I focus on the historical facts that we should bear in mind.

The connection between those Germanic tribes, Angles and Saxons, for what we need, and the natives of Britain is known thanks to Bede's work, *Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* (c. 731 AD), and to Alfred the Great's *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (c. 890 AD). Bede states that the first contact between Angles, Saxons and Britain, still under Roman administration, was made in the year 449 (Pyle I:XV), a fact also corroborated by Alfred the Great:

> "A.D. 449. This year Marcian and Valentinian assumed the empire ... Then came the men from three powers of Germany; the Old Saxons, the Angles, and the Jutes ... From the Old Saxons came the people of Essex and Sussex and Wessex. From Anglia, which has ever since remained waste between the Jutes and the Saxons, came the East Angles, the Middle Angles, the Mercians, and all of those north of the Humber. Their leaders were two brothers, Hengest and Horsa; who were the sons of Wihtgils; Wihtgils was the son of Witta, Witta of Wecta, Wecta of Woden ..." (Ingram n/p)

Thus, if we believe both accounts, the first Saxons arrived during the decline of the Roman empire. The first Danish raids to England seem to have taken place in the ninth century: "A.D. 833. This year fought King Egbert with thirty-five pirates at Charmouth, where a great slaughter was made, and the Danes remained masters of the field. Two bishops, Hereferth and Wigen, and two aldermen, Dudda and Osmod, died the same year." (Ingram n/p). However, Bede's work shows that they were known by the people of England from at least the year 689:

> "At that time [689 AD] the venerable servant of Christ, and priest, Eghert ... proposed to himself to do good to many, by ... preaching the word of God to some of those nations that   had not yet heard it; many of which nations he knew there were in Germany, from whom the   Angles or Saxons, *who now inhabit Britain*, are known to have derived their origin; ... Such [nations] are the Frisons, ... [and] the Danes ..." (Pyle V:IX; emphasis added)

That would mean that by the seventh century, if not before, contact between England and the Danes existed. It would be impossible to think that the author of *Beowulf* did not know anything about these people except what he had heard about them, since the royal families that the poet describes are genealogically correct, with the exception of those dealing with the age of different characters. Nevertheless, we should not regard *Beowulf* as just a historical poem. And, thus, we can argue that these exceptions do not diminish the credibility of the poem, and that they are poetical licenses or simple misinterpretations.

The *Sögur* also give us an account of the interrelations between the Nordic and the English worlds, as it appears in *Gunnlaug saga Ormstungu*:

> "*Ein var þá tunga á Englandi sem í Nóregi ok í Danmörku, en þá skiptusk tungur í Englandi er Vílhálmr bastarðr vann England; gekk þaðan af í Englandi valska, er hann var þaðan ættaðr*" ("The language in England was then one and the same as that in Norway and in Denmark, but when William the Bastard conquered England there was a change of language; from then onwards, French was current in England, since he was of French extraction"). (15)

With this paragraph, we understand that there was an actual exchange of culture and thus of language until year 1066, when William the Conqueror, also a descendant from the Vikings, brought influences from French that overcame those of the Germanic world.

2. Old English Poetry

In order to analyze Old English Poetry, I follow a pattern based on *A Guide to Old English* by Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, where the main aspects to be explained are Accent, Alliteration, the Five Types of Verse, Anacrusis, Hypermetric Verse and Rhyme. I deal only with form, since later I turn to content in *Beowulf*.

2.1. Accent

It is important to remark that every Old English line has a caesura in the middle, creating thus a pair of hemistiches, each of which having two accented syllables and a determined number of non-accented ones. Needless to say, the importance of the rhythm created by accented and non-accented syllables appears also in Modern English, Germanic Poetry and, what it is more interesting for the purpose of this paper, in Nordic poetry. However, the latter seems to lack in the use of weak syllables. As instead, some verses that we can find in the Poetic Edda for instance, relies only in strong syllables, for instance: "*Deyr fé,*" ("Hávamal" *Poetic Edda* 77) while in Old English Poetry, weak syllables were a resource as useful as rhyme or alliteration.

2.2. Alliteration

It is compulsory that the Old English line alliterates in some way. Both hemistiches are connected by this resource. However, not any syllable can alliterate:

- Any of both (or both) accented syllables from the first hemistich must alliterate with the first of the second.
- Non-accented syllables *may* or *may not* alliterate. It is not relevant (as it seems it was for Old English poets).
- Consonant clusters must alliterate as a whole. Thus, *tr-* does not alliterate with *t-*, nor *tn-* for instance.
- Vowels always alliterate (hence, it is not possible that the second accented syllable of the second hemistich bound with the first by alliteration of vowels starts with a vowel).

    Alliteration is more important in Icelandic literature. Alliterative verse is probably the most important way of composing skaldic poems, much more than syllabic verse or rhyme.

2.3. The Five Types of Verse

The five different kinds of verses in Old English depend on how many non-accented syllables lines have. In Old English, it is required that each hemistich has at least two non-accented syllables, and, if it has more than two, it must follow a pre-established pattern. There is, as in Modern English, secondary accents that should not be regarded as full accents, but as one of the elements that are used in some of the patterns.

    A poem can mix every pattern, each line with one, for instance. That is, Old English poems are not based on a type of verse, but often use all of them in any way the poet liked to. Thus, an A-verse could be followed by an E-verse and then a B-verse and so on.

    The key that I am going to use is the same as they do in *A guide to Old English* (XXX-XXXI). That is, **x** for the unmarked, ´ for the marked and ` for the secondary accents. If any of this is between parentheses, it means that it is optional.

<div align="center">

A-verse: ´ **x (x x x x) ´ x**
B-verse: **(x x x x) x ´ x (x) ´**
C-verse: **(x x x x x) x ´ ´ x**
D-verse: **´ (x x x) ´ ` x**
E-verse: **´ ` x (x) ´**
(*A guide to Old English* XXX-XXXI)

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These patterns are found in Eddic poetry. However, it seems that this resource was dismissed by the time of skaldic poetry.

2.4. Anacrusis
Anacrusis – the phenomenon by which a non-stressed syllable is set before an initial accented syllable – exists in Old English Poetry. For instance, in *Beowulf* we find it in line 9: "*oð þæt him aéghwylc / þára ymbsittendra*"

2.5. Hypermetric verse
Sometimes, a poem does not follow these patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables, and they include another stressed syllable on each hemistich. The reasons for doing so, apart from the obvious remark and emphasis on that 'stretched' lines, are unknown to us.

2.6. Rhyme
Rhyme does not have a role in Old English poetry. Its device of connection between verses seems to be more an alliterative one rather than a "rhythmical" one. Nonetheless, there are some examples of rhyme. It seems incidental, though, but the more we advance in time, the more it appears, transforming alliteration eventually into a secondary device.

3. Icelandic Poetry
Icelandic poetry, being the best preserved Old Nordic poetry nowadays, has some similarities with what we have seen already in Old English poetry. Before analyzing it, it is required to mention that all I know derives from the Prose Edda's *Háttatal* or "verse list" (Sturluson), which is, although a secondary source, the only one that we can rely as "canonical".

First, it is important to mention that there are at least three different kinds of Old Nordic poetry. The first one would be the one that we find in the poetic Edda, the *fornyrðislag*, or "the way of the elder words". This is the one that most resembles Anglo-Saxon poetry. The stanzas were constituted by at least two lines up to eight or more lines. It is important to mention that although it is similar to Old English Poetry, resources such as enjambment were of no use to them (the tendency was not to use them). The unaccented syllables that a line of *fornyrðislag* has goes from one to three, and the accented ones were usually two per hemistich, sometimes being three. The alliteration is the same as in Old English poetry, being compulsory that the first and the second hemistiches alliterate in one or two accents of the first hemistich and the first one of the second. There was a variant for this, called *málaháttr*, or "speech line", which added an unaccented syllable to each hemistich.

The second kind is what we call now the skaldic poetry. Icelandic skaldic poetry is organized in stanzas; as an example, we are going to use a *dróttkvætt,* a stanza of eight lines (*vísuorð*). Contrasting with the classical hemistiches/stressed syllables, it is organized based on number of syllables - although the accentuation is vital, the stanzas are analyzed and composed by number of lines, thus using the accent as the main resource to create rhythm. Each line in this example, composed by Egil Skallagrimsson is rhymed through alliteration, half-rhyme or full-rhyme.

For the analysis I will use the same pattern as they do in *The Sagas of the Icelanders* section on poetry (XXX-XXXI). That is, sounds that are written with bold letters are alliterative (*stuðlun*). Two of them (*stuðlar*) are in lines 1, 3, 5 and 7 and, in the even lines, that sound - called *höfuðstafur,* which could be translated as 'head letter' - is repeated in couplets. Thus, **st**órt, **st**áli and **st**afnkvígs (being the höfuðstafur the sound **st**) is alliterative in the first two lines. Represented with italics, the internal rhyme appears in both half-rhyme (called *skothending*) and full-rhyme (*aðalhending*). Examples of half rhyme are þ*él* and st*áli* and examples of full rhyme are st*afn*kvígs and j*afn*an:

Þél höggr stórt fyr stáli headwind	With its chisel of snow, the
stafnkvígs á veg jafnan	scourge of the mast, mightily
út með éla meitli	hones its file by the prow
andær jötunn vandar treads.	on the path that my sea-bull
En svalbúinn sel ju	In gusts of wind, that chillful
sverfr eirar vanr þeiri down	destroyer of timber planes
Gestils álft með gustum	the planks before the head
gandr of stál fyr brandi.	Of my sea-king's swan.

(Sagas of the Icelanders XXX)

As in almost every kind of syllabic poetry, one of the most difficult parts in order to understand this dróttkvæði structure is the "hyperbatonic" composition the syllabic writing requires usually. For instance, the order of words in this stanza would be *Andærr jötunn vandar höggr stórt þél fyr stáli með éla meitli út á jafnan veg stafnkvígs, en svalbúinn selju gandr sverfr eirar vanr of stál þeiri Gestils álft með gustuim fyr brandi* (XXX). However, translating this in its literal meaning would produce such a translation, according to the book: "'The opposite-rowing giant of the mast strikes hard, a file before the prow, with a chisel of sudden hail out on the smooth road of the young prow bull, and a cold wolf of wood files mercilessly with it about the prow of Gestil's swan with gusts before the decorated prow board.'" (XXX)

As one can see, there is something missing in this translation. This is resolved by the existence of a resource called *kenning*, which gives a sense to the whole stanza. A *kenning* is a kind of extended metaphor consisting in two parts: the first one, which makes a comparison with something that the thing we are defining is not (such as '*jötunn*', which can be translated as 'enemy' too) and a second that alters this first definition in order to "make it poetically appropriate." (XXX) For instance, in that example stated before, that 'enemy' is part of a kenning that, after deciphering, will give as a translation 'wind', which is not a giant/enemy. However, adding 'of the mast', 'enemy of the mast' could convey that meaning. Taking this into account, the rest of the kennings are relatively easy to understand. Note that the Nordic languages are flexive, thus being easy to create hierarchies of words one over another, and hence being easier to know with what word is another word linked.

The poetry we can find in the *sögur* is of this type. Its name is etymologically related to *skáld*, which means poet. It is one of the most complex for it varies in metrical forms and also in the patterns internal rhyme and alliteration create. *Dróttkvætt* is undoubtedly the most used of these measures. A possible reason to put poetry into the *sögur* could be to imitate the practices of the ancient kings' sagas in which lyrical voices and poetry were extremely important. According to *The Sagas of the Icelanders*, in the *Heimskringla* Prologue Snorri mentions the following relation to poetry being a historical source:

"When Harald Fair-hair was king of Norway, Iceland was settled. At the court of King Harald there were poets, and people still remember their poems and the poems about all the   kings who have since been in Norway; and we have taken the greatest amount of information from what is said in poems that were recited before the great men themselves or their sons. We consider everything as true that is found in those poems about their exploits and battles. It is the habit of poets to praise him most in whose presence they are; but no one would have   dared to recite to him deeds which everyone who listened, as well as he himself, knew to be fantasy and falsehood. That would have been mockery and not praise." (XVIII)

As we can extract from here, Snorri says that poetry was the most important historical account the Scandinavian world had. Therefore, we can deduce that the use of poetry works as an explanation, as a certification of the veracity of the story.

The last kind of Old Nordic Poetry would be made by a mixture of both lines, creating what it is called *ljóðaháttr*, or "song line", in which the odd lines were separated in two hemistiches and the even ones were syllabic, such as the ones that we saw just before. I should mention that, although I placed them last in my analysis, these stanzas were used earlier in time than the skaldic poetry. I have done so for the sake of analytical purposes.

"The Icelandic Sagas remain one of the great marvels of world literature, a great human achievement. We can see how much of our Western modern tradition of narrative realism begins with them. But we can also see that the subsequent seven centuries have produced no other work so timelessly up-to-date, nothing with such a supreme, undistorted sense of actuality, nothing so tempered and tested by such a formidable seriousness of life." (*The Sagas of the Icelanders* cover)

With these words, Ted Hughes praised the narrative that was developed during the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in the Nordic background. The word *saga* is etymologically related to the English word *say*. It could be loosely translated as "narration". There are different kinds of *sögur*, whose categorization deals with content (the subject matter or historical setting). Its classification is not useful to the purpose of this paper, although their historical sense has indeed some importance. Here I deal mostly with the rhetorical resources of the *sögur*; that is to say, the literary resources used and their reliability as historical sources.

As *The Sagas of the Icelanders* states in its introduction (XXV), it is extraordinarily hard to separate both the artistic and the chronological spheres in the *Íslendiga sögur.* That is to say, the authors of the *sögur* use a language that allows the greatest amount of clarity. *Sögur* never start *in media res*, like Homer's *Odyssey* does. They try to tell the story in the chronological order they occur, as much as possible. However, sometimes the resource of the flashback is needed if the main characters go along different paths and we need to think of them as acting at the same time, creating an intrusion in the narrative. However, there are some exceptions. One of them is *The Saga of the People of Josavatn*, in which the structure is experimental, including three *Þættir* ("Tales") within, which are not even chronologically related to the narrative, and distinguish also a flashback to describe part of the childhood of the two protagonists.

"Like the English word *story, saga* can refer either to a literary text or to the events themselves that are recounted in it." (XXVI) This ambivalence of the word is quite common for us, resolving it automatically and unconsciously depending on the context. Nevertheless, with *sögur* it is not that easy to distinguish between "saga as event and saga as a story mode more readily than most other forms of narrative." (XXVI); that is to say, sometimes a character disappears completely from a saga, both in the content and in its structural meaning; for instance, when a character dies and never reappears nor is even mentioned by the narrator.

The *sögur's* rhetoric was planned to be intentionally as objective as possible. That is, to tell the stories as they were, or at least as close as possible to the folklore narrative. Apart from the minimal appearance of the narrator in the texts, the author is not explicitly named, a device we cannot be sure if it is intended or not. Also, there is not any apparent hidden meaning, nor an intention of the author apart from narrating the story. Everything appears as a union, both "event and meaning." (XXVI) There are places in which the narrator appears in such a way as to create humor, using witty ironic remarks on events or characters.

Nevertheless, the composers of the *sögur* made explicit their awareness of the difference of time between his narration and the events they described. They accurately draw attention to this by creating, for instance, lapses of time that otherwise would not have

been possible, such as suppressing accounts regarding some parts of the hero's life. Other resources the authors used to create these lapses and also, in a way, to certify the veracity of their story, were mentioning an object that existed then and it still exists, or to point out the different customs from that time and those of the time of the composition of the story (such as the heathen-Christian contrast).

Almost every saga has another resource that proves to be very interesting for critics and was also used as an authenticating resource. That is, the mixture of genres through the use of poetic stanzas. The before mentioned variety of language that the lyrical devices contribute to create is a source of difficulties both for the author and the translator. Opposed to the forms from the *Edda*, described earlier, the poetry that appears in the *sögur* is extremely difficult and, not surprisingly, it is bound to Scandinavia, especially to Norway and Iceland.

This difficult task of searching sources of any kind to link the past with the present is a characteristic of the *sögur*, trying to mimic reality. Furthermore, if we believe them as fictional worlds (since they have, for instance, magic), we can question ourselves how reliable are these books as historical writing. "The *sögur* create fictional worlds which are largely consistent with those of *Íslendigabók* ("The book of Icelanders") and *Landnámabók* ("The book of Settlements"), including the settlement of Iceland or the establishment of a national government" (XXXI). These two events can be attested by archeology and by authors like Saxo Grammaticus and his *Gesta Danorum.* The *Sögur* explain the same events that can be confirmed and thus they are sources to understand the actual history that underlies in the fictional *sögur's* world.

Basing it on the analysis made by Daniel J. Cottle and the comparisons made by J. Michael Stitt, in the following, I will contrast a saga (*Grettis saga*) with *Beowulf* in order to understand the narrative differences. As Beowulf, Grettir is presented as a descendant of his forefathers, the first part of both the poem and the saga relying on the deeds of their ancestors. However, there are some differences from this point until Beowulf is totally presented. While Grettir's description is chronological and he is described both physically - "Grettir was fair to look on, broad-faced, short-faced, red-haired, and much freckled; not of quick growth in his childhood" (*Grettir saga* 28) - and with personality traits - "he was very froward in his childhood; of few words, and rough; worrying both in word and deed" (28) -, the description of Beowulf appears thematically, as Cottle states. (4) Beowulf's portrait is, thus, fragmented depending on the part of the story that the poet is narrating, and hence intertwining description with narrative. This is the only point in which both *Beowulf* and *Grettis saga* are different as far as narrative is concerned. After this, the narration of both works continues the chronological line without alterations. However, as aforementioned, flashbacks appear sometimes, as in Beowulf's adventure with Breca, for instance. The style tends to be objective, although in the case of *Beowulf* is a little rhetoric. However, the actions are easy to see, and we are drawn into a world we can visualize.

All in all, this is not the only analogy we can find of sagas being similar in narrative structure to *Beowulf*. In fact, there is not any saga that does not develop in the same way as the poem. That is, presentation of the character's genealogy, presentation of the character itself (although slightly changed), his deeds and his death.

5. Cultural Issues

What we learn of the Germanic heroic code, thanks to work by John Hill (50-58 and 160-168) on Old English literature, is mostly this: The Germanic warrior was a member of a committee, a band, in which the presence of the Germanic usual doom against insuperable odds was decreed by a meaningless fate (*wyrd*). There is no evidence in their literature that the pagan Anglo- Saxons believed in a life after death, opposed to *Valhöll*, the place where Óðinn had his chosen ones, or to *Fólkvangr*, where Freyja had hers. However, there are some references of the Anglo-Saxons venerating gods such as Woden (Germanic for Óðinn) Þórr or Freyr, as we can see, for instance, in the days of the week (Woden's-day, Thor's-day

and Freyr's-day), which, of course, come from the Germanic heathen background given to the isles by the current interactions we saw earlier. There are also some funeral rituals that can be related to this Germanic background, such as the cremation tradition (probably brought by these nations), but in any case, even though they apparently do not believe in some kind of after-life banquet with heathen gods, they did believe in a kind of immortality achieved by glory (and thus, probably, recognized in the way of wealth – putting jewelry on a king that has earned this prestigious glory, for instance), thus being the warrior the one to achieve it.

This warrior would have a reckless courage that surpasses the instinct of survival. It is the brave who would achieve immortality, not the coward, who probably would not fulfill his *wyrd*, dying before his time has come. This is the essence of Beowulf, being the warrior that defeats what the Danes had been unable to overcome: Grendel. He is as well the one that, in a last attempt of achieving immortality, fights a deadly battle with the dragon, defeating it in the end, at the cost of his own life. And this is also the essence of Wiglaf, the young warrior who follows Beowulf against the dragon without hesitating.

Religion is also a very important matter, both in the cultural world as in the literary world. There are several references in the poem that could be related to Christendom, such as the mention of Grendel of being from "Cain's clan" (Heaney 106), but there are also some others that can be related to Nordic issues. As we saw earlier, Alfred the Great was aware of the Germanic religion, and he describes their royal family as the progeny of the god *Woden* (Germanic for *Óðinn*). The assumption of this god for the natives after the "conquest" of England by the Saxons could not have been very difficult, since it was easily related to Roman gods early in the fifth century by Julius Caesar in *De Bello Gallico*, where he mentions that the Gauls worshiped Mercury over anyone else (VI:17). Also, the Celtic god Lugus could be also related to him.

Regarding the purpose of this paper, the importance of this god is no other that the customs derived from him, such as the Ring-giving practice of Hroðgar. This tradition could be exemplified in (rather than based on) *Draupnir*, Óðinn's ring which drops a new ring every nine nights. This is a myth of abundance. The custom of a king giving rings as a symbol of abundance could be based on that story, and it seems that the poet was familiar with this custom. However, although this is a clue, it is not proof enough to answer the question that will be stated later,

Another aspect that could be related to the cultural world of the *sögur* and of the poem is that of Christianity. Interestingly enough, many mentions in *Beowulf* could be drawn and directed both to God and to *Óðinn*: " … holy God/decided the victory" (1553-54) for one of *Óðinn*'s feats is that he is the one who decides who is the victor and who the defeated in any war he decides to intervene. This second mention of *Óðinn* is not just casual. This poem deals with the heathen world, written by a converted poet. This also happens with the *sögur*, which were written down during the Middle Ages. But then again, it is the same case as before: We can draw parallelisms between the Christian God and Óðinn that are more cultural than literary, this meaning that it is as plausible as it is not that the poet was aware of this relation in order to make the poem more similar to the heathen world than just being a cultural fact of the time in which it was written, being thus more a historical key than a cultural one.

Another element that we can analyze as heathen and religious is the rune-marking Hroðgar mentions to Beowulf when he gave the hilt of the sword that he used to behead Grendel. Runes were very important in the heathen world, being so that Óðinn hanged himself from Yggdrasill, the ash that appears in the Nordic heathen world as the center of the nine worlds of Norse Mythology, in order to achieve its knowledge ("Hávamal" 138, *Poetic Edda* trans. Hollander). In that book there are also elements related to the power of the runes. What we need to know right now is that they were magical, giving special powers to the element on which they were carved (both flesh and iron) and that they are closely related to the heathen world as a source of magic. We can understand these runes, as the

author mentions, as "ornamental" or, since this sword is the one that beheads Grendel, we can understand it as magical. This last interpretation acquires a religious meaning if we understand the "Lord of Men" that Beowulf mentions as the Christian God, being more an example of how this two worlds, the heathen and the Christian lived in ambivalence during those times.

Now, the question that could be risen, after all this development, is, taking into account all this similarities with the Nordic world, is it possible that the tale traveled through Denmark to North England and have been written there? The answer is not that clear, taking into account how much related these two worlds are, but I personally think it is relevant to bear in mind that possibility. As I will analyze in the following section, the traditions that nourish the tale are also related to the Nordic cultures.

6. Tale, folktale and Indo-European cultural relations.

In this section I deal mostly with Beowulf's slaying of Grendel, although there will be mentions to the other parts as well. A brief summary of Grendel's episode, keeping the key events in mind, would be this: Beowulf goes to Hroðgar's hall to battle against Grendel, the monstrous creature that raids this place during the night. Beowulf, pretending to be asleep observes how the monster devours one of his warriors and, weaponless, Beowulf charges against him, tearing Grendel's arm. The monster escapes but, while feasting for the victory, Grendel's vengeful mother appears. The party leaded by Beowulf tracks her to her mere and there he fights her. His sword is useless against her, but he finds a gigantic one hanging on a wall and he kills her with it. After that he decapitates Grendel. Meanwhile, Hroðgar and his men in the shore take the appearing of blood as a sign of Beowulf having been slain. Later, Beowulf appears with Grendel's head and they return to the hall to feast.

The main analog for this in the Saga world would possibly be *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*, the one analyzed before. In that saga, Grettir "He heard great din [while he was sleeping] and thereafter into the hall came a huge troll-wife … All night did they contend … [and he] swiftly seized the short-sword that he was girt withal, and smote the troll therewith on the shoulder, and struck off her arm; and therewithal was he free, but she fell into the gulf and was carried down the force" (194-195). Later on, accompanied by a priest (who watches from the outside), our hero enters into this underwater cave, where he finds a giant whose short-sword cannot kill, but Grettir takes a sword that was hanging on a wall and stabs him to death, sparing his gore, thus making the priest believe that Grettir was dead and making him to go home. Later, Grettir takes two bones from two dead bodies that were there and leaves.

As we can see, there are so many elements in common among them to simply see them as coincidental. "The early comparativists quickly perceived that tales do not combine motifs randomly. There are stable sequences of motifs that recount complete narratives and that recur over broad geographic areas and periods of time" (Stitt, 19). However, Stitt continues by saying that there were some critics that defended the theory that *Beowulf* was in fact much more linked to a Celtic Irish narrative tradition which has been given the name of "The Hand and the Child" than to the *sögur* and legendary narratives (21). Eventually, he states, recent folk narrative studies' emphasis "has shifted from abstract constructs to actual text; a given text now is perceived simultaneously as a sequence of motifs and as the product of an entire culture or subculture, and as the product of a particular individual, and as the product of a particular context of narration" (21). He then goes further by analyzing the different traditions Beowulf could be related to. For the sake of my purpose, I will only detail the analogs with the *sögur*:

6.1. The Dragonslayer tradition

The Dragonslayer tradition has as a necessary element the slaying of a viperous enemy, such as a Dragon or a serpent. Apart from the obvious mention of the dragon in Beowulf, we can see analogs in the first part of the poem (Beowulf's boast of killing different sea-monsters).

Although most of the text we could relate from this tradition belongs to Iranian literary tradition, we can find some analogs with Scandinavian *sögur*: For instance, the importance of swimming in this tradition is also found in the Scandinavian corpus, with slight changes. Scandinavian swimming prowess has two parts: a test of endurance and might and then a water battle versus an enemy, whether human or inhuman. As the purest example of analog with Beowulf, Finnbogi the Mighty (*The Sagas of the Icelanders*, 239-246) has almost the same experience of a swimming adventure as Beowulf.

The companion during a dragon fight, Wiglaf in this case or his friend Breca, is also an element that could be related to this tradition, and more specific, with Scandinavian representatives of this tradition, such as *Hrólfs saga Kraka*, *Færinga Saga* or *Finnboga saga* (Mitt 35-40). In the last one, Finnbogi goes to fight a bear so that him does not kill both livestock and farmers. While he wrestles with him, Finnbogi breaks the bear's back and later on he is joined by a hunting party. These companions do not only exist in the *sögur*, but as well in Snorri's *Prose Edda*, where *Þórr* fights against Hrungnir with the aid of *Þjálfi* (78-81). This last one is also interesting, since *Þórr* is trapped under the body of Hrungnir after defeating him and asks for help. This "pinned hero" appears in many *sögur*, although it is normally the companion who needs help from the hero. Nevertheless, *Beowulf* has a similar episode after he is mortally wounded by the Dragon, and asks from Wiglaf some kind of "help" - to die satisfied.

6.2. The Two-troll tradition
The second tradition to be analyzed deals only with the *Sögur*, such as *Gríms saga loðinkinna*, *Halfdanar saga Brönufóstra*, or *Ketils saga hængs*. However, as Mitt states, it could also be related to *Beowulf* (Mitt 43-80). In order to do so, we should know that this tradition starts by what Propp called *Villainy* episode (Propp, 16), in which the antagonists make a move that causes harm (raiding a hall, stealing livestock…) followed by a *First Fight episode*. It is common that this fight ends inconclusively, but being the hero the one that was having the advantage. Later on, there is a *Second fight episode*, in which "typically the hero enters a troll's cave and encounters a couple or family …", (Mitt, 58) and where the hero uses a sword that was there. Also, sometimes "a troll's hand or arm may be cut off" (58). However, we cannot talk of a transmission of manuscripts, although we can adventure that orally, this tradition existed:

> There is no linear pattern of manuscript transmission among the Two-Troll tradition. But the emphasis must be on the lack of linearity, not the lack of manuscript transmission. Whatever the mode of transmission – written, read aloud or told – the esthetic of transmission results in variation around a stable narrative core … It is the narrative tradition itself that is significant. (Mitt, 94)

Relations among this tradition and *Beowulf* are relatively easy to find. However, this slight "variations around a stable narrative core" are also present. For instance, in the poem it is said that Grendel felt that he was annoyed by the warriors when he started raiding, thus being rather a victim than a villain at first sight.

6.3. The Gravemound Battle Tradition
This tradition's main points can be summarized easily: There is a treasure below the hero that is sought, thus the hero uses a rope to descend while a companion waits holding the rope. However, when the hero tries to get the treasure there is a complication. Sometimes it is a foe that has been disturbed and sometimes, the companion of the hero turns his back on him and abandons him, either cutting the rope or just leaving it there, but the hero is able to return (Mitt). Whether the text shows a metaphorical descent to hell or not, the analogs among this and some scenes, such as Beowulf's descent to hunt down Grendel's mother or

the Dragon's lair, which was "stone-roofed", and where a thief enters (presumably through this roof) to steal a goblet without his being totally unaware of the dragon.

6.4. The Hand and the Child Tradition

This tradition from Irish origin has been often seen as a possible source for *Beowulf*. It is probable that, despite its Scandinavian origins, the Irish literature did influence to the writing of *Beowulf*. First of all, the tradition has, as a Villain, a gigantic creature that inserts his hand into a chimney to abduct a child. However, the hero is waiting and cuts off his arm, and then pursues him into his lair, where he must fight the monster's family. Although we can see a possible analogy here, there are also examples of this tearing off an arm in the Scandinavian tradition. And the same happens with the fact that the hero is asleep. *Grettis saga* has also this event. Thus, as Mitt says, "If there was influence it was on the entire medieval Scandinavian tradition, not on *Beowulf*." (204)

It is possible then to think of a mixed Irish-Scandinavian origin if we think that the *sögur* might be influenced back by this and not lasted as stable oral tradition (unthinkable by all means). However, Mitt theorizes about the possibility of a same origin, that is, an Indo-European one. If we take *Beowulf* as the product of Indo-European literature, thus influenced by the same narrative structure as the ones down to Iranian or Middle East, it draws a pattern in which Irish-Scandinavian origin *could* make sense, but with "characteristics that make it a regionally distinct form of the Indo-European tradition." (205)

7. Conclusions

As we have seen, *Beowulf*'s origin, structure and content are far from being a simple question and it is indebted to different sources, mainly the Germanic world. Since it is impossible to trace back the exact origin of the text, the only thing that one can do is to dive into different secondary sources that could be related to this piece of knowledge from the past. Its historical intention mixed with fantastic elements seems like a perfect metaphor for the age in which it was supposed to have been written, the Dark Age or Migration Period. As Mitt states, "we have no Scandinavian versions contemporary with the Grendel episode; we must look to the *sögur* of the thirteenth and fourteenth century" (205).

However, these *sögur* do give us a hint on how the narrative structure of the Scandinavian Folk tale worked, and possibly inspired this poem. However appealing this theory is, it should be remembered that until now, this theory is nothing but a line of investigation to be opened, thus it being so far impossible to consider as part of a solid-ground investigation and no more than a plausible hypothesis. However, the intricate process by which this poem has been made, the similarities between form from Germanic origin, the belonging to traditions that are sometimes only found in the Nordic world (the Two-Troll tradition), and the similarities of content with so many different examples given and analyzed in this paper argue for a non-coincidental origin, which also applies to the motifs of the heroic narration. It seems as if *Beowulf* and the *sögur* belong to the same tradition, known by the authors and the audiences too, for we should never forget that the most probable theory for the intention of both kind of works was no other than to be narrated orally, not read – as were the laws in the Nordic regions, where a Law-speaker was in charge of memorizing that what was written and likewise, the poet's main role was to compose and to recite his verses. If we are able to verify this link, we will be a step nearer to find the treasure of the Dragon, and thus, also nearer to the possibility of letting Beowulf to rest peacefully from this battle against lack of knowledge.

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